

Hearings on Religious Freedom in India and Pakistan: Vijay K. Sazawal, Ph.D Prepared Testimony

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VIOLENCE AGAINST KASHMIRI HINDUS (PANDITs)

Members of the Commission, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank the Commission for inviting me to testify at this hearing. I consider it a privilege that I will fulfill to the best of my abilities. I have been asked to address the situational analysis with respect to violence against Kashmiri Hindus, usually referred on the Indian subcontinent as Kashmiri Pandits.

My name is Vijay Sazawal. I am an American and a Kashmiri Pandit. I was born and raised in Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu & Kashmir, and live in Potomac, Maryland.

My organization, the Indo-American Kashmir Forum, to distinguish it from the other Kashmiri organization at this hearing, is an all-volunteer organization. Everyone in our group is gainfully employed in various professions, and there are no paid staff members either full time or part time. It is strictly a labor of love, as much as it is for our two sister organizations, the London and Geneva based Indo-European Kashmir Forum and the Ottawa based Indo-Canadian Kashmir Forum. We, all U.S. citizens, started the Forum in 1991 after the casualty count

in our community in Kashmir touched each and every Kashmiri Pandit family that has migrated to the U.S. The primary objective of our organization is to highlight and try to bring an end to atrocities committed against our families in Kashmir. It should be noted that in spite of brutality and humiliation that Pandits have suffered in the past one decade, not one -let me repeat NOT ONE -case exists where a Kashmiri Pandit has resorted to any violence in return. Kashmiri Pandits have paid a heavy price for their nonviolent and tolerant behavior. The sad part is that the Kashmir issue gets so wrapped up in global concerns on one side and obfuscated by massive state sponsored propaganda on the other, that so few people know about the tragic state of Kashmiri Pandits. It is, by and large, an untold story.

Perhaps Kashmiri Hindus should have foreseen the calamity. In January 1986, massive communal riots occurred in Anantnag (Southern Kashmir), in which the minority community (Pandits) lost nearly 300 homes and two temples were burnt down. What was amazing was that the State government, being run by the majority (Kashmiri Muslims), used a massive cover-up to hide the event. The local Muslim government in Anantnag (which is a historical name since 100 BC, but Muslims have unofficially named the city as Islamabad) dismissed the whole event as a figment of imagination. I wrote a letter to the New York Times on

March 10th 1986 describing how the Kashmiri Pandit minority is being squeezed out of Kashmir, and their reaction was, "You cannot be serious. Are you telling us Hindus are suffering in predominantly Hindu India?" I said yes, and they referred my letter to Mr. Steven Weisman who was their bureau chief in New Delhi. Mr. Weisman wrote back to me and to his editor on April 15, 1986 acknowledging, and I quote, "... that protesting Moslems attacked temples, homes and stores of the Kashmiri Pandits." In fact, the indifference shown by both the State government in Kashmir and the Central government in India was telling us something, which we did not fully comprehend then. Only later, when the killing

of Pandits started in earnest from 1989, did we realize how expendable we were as a community. The local Muslims did not want to display their closet skeletons, and to the Central government in New Delhi, our community did not have an appeal of a vote bank. Indeed, the aggregate strength of the Pandit community is under 500,000. That is not enough to deliver even a single Member of Parliament (MP) in India.

The communal riots of 1986 in South Kashmir and the killing of Pandits that began systematically soon thereafter was viewed in a broader context by commentator Charles Krauthammer in a piece in the Washington Post dated February 16, 1990. He warned the civil society of a new danger that was reflected in the title of his article, "The New Crescent of Crisis: Global Intifada." Mr. Krauthammer, described the dangers of emerging new mix of Islamic fundamentalism and politics. In relation to Kashmir, he said, and I quote, "The Moslems are fighting for (1) domination over their province, and (2) domination over the local non-Muslim minorities."

The killings, rape and plunder of Kashmiri Hindus started in earnest with the death of a prominent social worker in Srinagar on September 14, 1989, now recognized by our community as the "Martyrs' Day". Starting with prominent citizens in the valley, including political leaders and government officials, the killings became increasingly random and gruesome. For example, on April 6, 1990, Mrs. Girja Tikoo, a housewife in Kupwara district of Kashmir, was gang raped by Islamic militants and then cut into pieces by a wood saw. The Financial Times of London in a story from Srinagar dated April 1, 1992, described the agony of a Hindu family in Srinagar (sadly in the same precinct where I was born) that gave food and shelter to two armed Muslim terrorists who initially promised no harm, but raped the women folk and killed the family any way.

Over a thousand Kashmiri Pandits, which represent a significant proportion of their population, were killed by Islamic militants in nearly a two year period. The militants had a clear motive to drive non-Muslim "infidels" out of the State to create the Nizam-e-Mustafa (Muslim paradise), and it was not unusual to see posters and announcements asking Pandits to leave the valley. One such poster is attached with my testimony. A prominent Urdu newspaper, Alsafa, ran the following headline on April 14, 1990, "Kashmiri Pandits responsible for duress against Muslims should leave the valley within two days."

The consequences of the violence unleashed against Pandits was thus predictable. Nearly all of the Kashmiri Pandits, who were lucky to escape from the terror, did so starting from January 1990. Today, practically the entire indigenous population of Kashmiri Pandits is displaced and living in wretched make-shift refugee camps in North India. The statistics

do not do full justice to their misery. A total of 72,077 families, representing nearly 98% of the Pandit population, were driven out due to ethnic cleansing. The official figures indicate that 16,850 civilians (Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs) have been killed by terrorists in the period 1981-1997, 9309 homes have been burnt down, along with 1659 small business shops. A total of 93 temples, 27 Mosques and 2 Sikh Gurudwaras were destroyed in the same period. Even today, a decade later, nearly 50,000 families are living in refugee camps, with approximately 60% camped in Jammu region and the rest in Delhi region. The total number of Kashmiri Pandits refugees (216,820 in Jammu and 143,565 in New Delhi for a total of 360,385) is comparable to the number of Kosovars who were driven out by Serbs, yet no one seems to care about the fate of Kashmiri Pandits.

A particular oddity in the entire affair is the lack of leadership shown by the Central government in New Delhi. After all, if the Indian government is supposedly a pro-Hindu government as it is often referred to in the western media, then why did not the Central government, run by the Congress Party in those years, come to the aid of its citizens, even more so as these were

Kashmiris who were loyal to India? Ms. Mary McGrory, a columnist for the Washington Post explained it this way (August 27, 1992): "Across the globe in Kashmir, blameless people are suffering hellish persecution not for anything they did but for being who they are. The Kashmiri Pandits, a minority Hindu sect that has lived in Kashmir for 5,000 years, would like to go home. They have been driven off their ancestral land by terrorism of Islamic guerrillas who wish to annex Kashmir to the crescent of fundamentalist countries in the area. India, which will do anything to keep Kashmir in its possession, has refused to acknowledge the existence of the Pandits in refugee camps along the border, because they do not want to add a religious element to the problem." Curiously, Pakistan government more or less agreed with the assessment that Kashmiri Pandits were victims of ethnic cleansing. In response to the McGrory's column, Mr. Malik Zahoor Ahmad, the Press Attache in the Embassy of Pakistan wrote to the Post editor on August 28, 1992, "I was surprised to read that the Kashmiri refugees mentioned are the notorious Kashmiri Pandits who had wielded disproportionately excessive powers in the Kashmir valley and have now been driven out by the hitherto oppressed Kashmiri people." If Kashmiri Pandits today feel like persecuted Jews of the Nazi era, now you know why.

As in the case of Jews, it was the interest shown by the United States that made their problem and its implications known to the world. I want to particularly highlight the work of the House Republican Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, sponsored by Congressman Bill McCollum (FL), which issued a hard hitting report, "The Kashmir Connection", on May 21' 1994,

detailing true dimensions of the Jihad in Kashmir. And after sustained efforts by our organization with the help of Democratic Congressman Sherrod Brown (OH), the U.S. Department of State agreed in 1996 to rectify past omission and make mention of the Pandit community in the annual Human Rights Report. Small as these efforts may seem, these were actually highly significant in so far as Kashmiri Hindus are concerned since the Indian government was little inclined to even recognize their problems.

Kashmiri Pandits have been living a life of misery, away from their lands, for the last eleven years. They want to go back. But will the Muslim militants allow it? Ever since the elected government came to power in Kashmir, any talk of return has unleashed new brutality against the handful of Pandits still living quietly in Kashmir. Beginning from May 1997 to until now, there have been over a dozen attacks on villages harboring Pandits in the valley and many Pandits, along with Sikhs and Muslims, have lost their lives. A particularly gruesome massacre took place in Wandhama on the night of January 25, 1998, when the entire population of Kashmiri Hindus -men, women and children -was wiped out by Islamic terrorists. While not a single Muslim was harmed, the terrorists systematically locked Kashmiri Pandits in their homes that were subsequently torched. The choice given to these unfortunate victims was either to be burnt alive or to bail

out and be cut down by AK-47's. In the process 23 Pandits lost their lives. Such brutality continues up to this day and will not cease as long as terrorists roam freely in Kashmir

Kashmiri Pandits take a very dim view of the talks that the present Central government in India (supposedly another pro-Hindu government according to western media) wants to hold with Kashmiri terrorists. The Hizbul Mujahideen Commander, Abdul Majid Dar, was quoted in the Statesman Weekly, dated August 8, 1992, "We have information that most of the Kashmiri Pandits have received arms training and have also been enrolled in the Intelligence Bureau. Their return can be harmful for our movement. Hence, they cannot be allowed back." Now that the same terrorist has been wined and dined by the NDA government in secret parleys held in Dubai and New Delhi recently, has there been a change in their attitude? Here is what the official spokesman of Hizbul Mujahideen said in Srinagar on August 20, 2000, "We are prepared to use force to foil the return of Kashmiri Pandits. We disagree with government's plan and the security of migrants cannot be guaranteed." Our Forum believes in the U.S. policy- no negotiation with terrorists. Furthermore, no solution of Kashmir issue is acceptable to Pandits without their full participation in the political process.

Many times we have asked ourselves, what goes on in the mind of these religious zealots? A measure of that is reflected by the following incident in Sopore as reported in the Washington Post dated July 10' 2000. The Post reporter writes of one Mr. Abdul Khaliq whose son was allegedly killed by the Indian security forces. Instead of condemning senseless violence in Kashmir that has taken a heavy toll and reflecting on his personal grief, the words that Mr.

Kaliq uttered to the reporter were revealing, "This is a struggle between Islam and infidels. We want the freedom to be with Pakistan. We want all Muslims of the world to unite under one leader, and let it begin here." The zealots wanted Nizam-e-Mustafa (paradise) but turned Kashmir into Nizam-e-Qahar (hell).

So what should Kashmiri Pandits conclude from their misery? That India is ruled by Hindu fundamentalists? If so, who are they and where are they? What we see is a nation that is struggling to live up to the ideals that are enshrined in its Constitution, but has not quite made it yet. We see a country that has good intentions, but nevertheless has not yet delivered on all of its promises. We see a country that is still in a nation-building mode. Let us not forget that the U.S. Constitution too has edicts that remain a distinct promise for many even after 200 years. The African-Americans got the right to vote long after the whites, and for women the wait was even longer.

In many ways, problems with the Pandits and the whole issue of religious fundamentalism in India, was fostered by the Congress Party which spoke of "secularism", but really meant appeasement towards a particular religion. The reasons were entirely parochial. The polling research showed that minorities tended to vote as a block, and as the Congress Party degenerated into a dynasty rule where corruption became rampant, the Party discovered a new way to keep itself in power. Obviously, in a multi-ethnic and a multi-religious country, such a move was bound to lead to some reaction, and it did. India has done poorly in debating nationalism in public. And the vote bank politics, invented by the Congress Party and used even more voraciously by successor governments, has done more harm to Indian polity than any other single development in the history of this budding nation.

Let me conclude by saying that first, we thank the Commission for allowing us to speak on behalf of the Kashmiri Pandits who are "refugees in their own country". Second, the Pandits were driven out of Kashmir by ethnic cleansing simply because of their religious beliefs that put them at odds with the Jihad being aided and abetted by Pakistan, but

cloaked in the politically correct garb of a freedom struggle. Third, Pandits today are withering away in refugee camps and the entire community that has lived in Kashmir uninterrupted for 5,000 years is racing towards oblivion. Fourth, no body -not the Indian government, not the international human rights organizations, not the U.S. government seems to care, all offering nothing more than the usual rhetoric. And finally, if you wish "the Indian government to take more effective steps to protect religious freedom and lives and security of persons of religious minorities in India" (letter from Mr. Elliott Abrams to the President, dated September 6, 2000), please make sure to include and identify Kashmiri Hindus as victims too. Thank you.

I am ready to respond to any questions from the Commission

Screaming Posters on the Walls of Kashmiri Pandit Homes and Shops

Seal of the Central Office of

Allah TigersAllah-O-Akbar

MUSLIMS AWAKE

ALL INFIDELS VANISH

JIHAD IS APPROACHING